

# Paradise

## WITH A MISSION

Story By SGM Karen Murdock

HAWAIIAN ISLANDS →

← JOHNSTON ATOLL

tory, V-series nerve agent, is scheduled for destruction by March of next year.

This lonely atoll is also home to 226 military members, 20 Department of the Army civilians and 833 civilian contractors. Being out “in the middle of nowhere” may not be everyone’s idea of a great assignment, but according to the island residents, life is good.

“If my family was here, I’d stay forever,” said SPC John Dobbs, a legal clerk. “There’s plenty to do, and I love my job. And it’s nice to know we’re making a difference in the world. How many people can actually say that about their jobs?”

These sentiments are echoed all over the island. For example, USACAP safety manager Paul Corbett says he plans to stay through the closeout.

“I’ve been here since 1995, and it’s my second time here. I was also the safety manager from 1989 to 1991,” Corbett said. “Many people may consider this to be a tough assignment because of the isolation, but it’s a great

chemical munitions.

The atoll is home to the world’s first full-scale, operational chemical-disposal facility, the Johnston Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal System, or JACADS. The atoll is also the location of the U.S. Army Chemical Activity, Pacific, whose mission is to secure and safely store toxic munitions and deliver them to the disposal facility.

To date, JACADS has safely destroyed 93 percent of the chemical munitions on the atoll. This includes 72,213 115mm rockets filled with GB and VX nerve agent, all of the bulk containers holding 112,548 pounds of mustard agent and 98,605 pounds of GB nerve agent, 45,154 HD-filled 105mm projectiles, and all of the 5,615 500- and 700-pound GB-filled bombs originally stored on the atoll.

The remaining 7 percent of inven-

**I**T’S a speck of land in the middle of the Pacific Ocean — a small, ancient atoll resting on the core of a volcanic island buried under 70 million years of coral

growth.

Located about 700 miles southwest of Hawaii, it looks like a lonely landing strip in the middle of nowhere.

But don’t be fooled by its size and location. Although it may be seemingly at the end of the world, Johnston Atoll is at the forefront in the United States’ effort to rid the world of

SGM Karen Murdock works for the U.S. Army, Pacific, Public Affairs Office at Fort Shafter, Hawaii.



place. The contractors work hard to make life as good as possible.”

## **HISTORIC AND SAFE**

British sea captain James Johnston discovered the atoll in 1807. It consists of four islands — Johnston (base for all operations), Sand, North and East. The islands have a total area of 691 acres, a little over one square mile.

Johnston Atoll became a national wildlife refuge in 1926. In 1971, the Army leased 41 acres to store chemical weapons formerly held on Okinawa. Planning for the JACADS began in 1981 and construction of the plant started in 1986. Chemical munitions

destruction began in 1990.

Safety has top priority on the island. Visitors must go through a safety briefing after landing and complete a protective mask fitting and testing session.

“Safety is the most important aspect of life here,” said COL Michael Brown, USACAP’s commander. “We must safely store and secure toxic chemical materiel to ensure all island residents and visitors are never put at risk.”

One of those recent visitors was MG James Donald, deputy commanding general of U.S. Army, Pacific, who observed battle drills conducted by mission teams of the island’s Chemical



One of the red-footed boobies that call Johnston Island home sits atop its nest. The island and its surrounding waters are home to a range of birds and aquatic life.





**SSG Steven R. Pelletier (left) restrains SGT Patrick Henry — who portrayed an “intruder” during a training exercise — as PV2 Gary Moyer locks the gate.**

Ammunition Company and Military Police Co.

These drills were in preparation for the annual Department of the Army inspector general chemical surety inspection. The drills included inspecting munitions in the magazines and responding to simulations of a chemical agent leak and a chemical casualty. The MPs responded to a simulated break-in into the JACADS facility, known as the “Red Hat area.”

“Red Hat” was the name of the operation to bring the munitions from Okinawa in 1971. It was also the identifier for the person in charge — the man in the red hat.

### **PUTTING AN END TO CHEMICAL WEAPONS**

SPC Philip Cook, a chemical-operations specialist, said his participation on the JACADS team has been a

special honor and responsibility.

“It’s difficult to get away from it all on an island this small, but the work satisfaction is great,” he said. “Chemical weapons are horrible and shouldn’t be in the world. But I know I’m helping to get rid of them. I would be extremely happy if this job didn’t exist, if there were no more chemical weapons to destroy.”

He may soon get his wish.

According to USACAP CSM John Isaacs, “our current schedule plans for the last chemical munitions to be shipped to the JACADS for demilitarization during the January-March 2001 time frame. The plant is scheduled to begin the shut-down process in June. Once that’s completed, we’ll begin removing USACAP assets from Johnston Island and inactivate the unit.”

Johnston Atoll isn’t the only demilitarization plant processing the stockpile of U.S. chemical munitions. There are also facilities in Umatilla, Ore.; Deseret, Utah; Pueblo, Colo.; Pine Bluff, Ark.; Aberdeen, Md.; and

## **DESTROYING CHEMICAL STOCKPILES**

**T**HE U. S. Army Chemical Activity, Pacific, had its beginnings April 20, 1945, when the 267th Chemical Service Platoon was activated at Fort Richardson, Alaska, but the platoon was inactivated on Nov. 1 of the same year, primarily because of the end of World War II.

The platoon was activated in 1962 and assigned to the U.S. Army Depot, Okinawa. It became the 267th Chem. Company in 1965 and was reassigned to the 196th

Ordinance Battalion, 2nd Logistics Command, Okinawa.

The U.S. government directed relocation of chemical munitions from Okinawa to Johnston Island in 1971. The initial phase of Operation Red Hat involved the movement of chemical munitions from a depot storage site to Tengan Pier, eight miles away, and required 1,332 trailers in 148 convoys. The second phase of the operation moved the munitions to Johnston Atoll.

Completion of cargo discharge from the USNS *McGraw* at Johnston Island on Sept. 21 completed Operation Red Hat, and the company completed redeployment on Sept. 27.

The company came under the 45th General Support Group in 1976 and was redesignated as Johnston Island Chemical

Activity in October 1983. The unit was reorganized and activated as the U.S. Army Chemical Activity, Western Command, in 1985.

The unit was renamed the U. S. Army Chemical Activity, Pacific, in 1990, to coincide with the redesignation of U.S. Army, Pacific. Worldwide attention was focused on Johnston Atoll that same year, when chemical munitions were moved from West Germany, under the code name Operation “Steel Box.”

Merchant ships carrying the munitions left Germany in October and arrived at Johnston Island Nov. 6. Although the ships were unloaded within nine days, the unpacking and storing of munitions continued into 1991. — *SGM Karen Murdock*



Anniston, Ala. Facilities in Newport, Ind., and Lexington, Ky., are for chemical-munitions storage.

However, the Johnston Atoll facility is the only place with soldiers dealing with the security, storage and transport of chemical munitions.

“Once all the close-out operations are completed, the atoll will be returned to the Department of the Interior. The island will probably remain a fish and wildlife refuge,” said Isaacs.

Until then, the soldiers of USACAP will continue to do what they do, and will know they’re making a difference in the world. □

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee Lindsey Hayes holds a brown booby chick, one of Johnston Island’s most recent arrivals.**



**A member of the first team opens the door to munitions storage magazine number 766, which contains munitions filled with VX nerve agent.**

